

# Improving Internships in Serbia:

## What We Know and Need to Know



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## Key Messages

- ▶ Youth- and long-term unemployment in Serbia remain high, with the lack of skills and work experience cited as key obstacles to hiring new workers.
- ▶ Work-based learning, including internships, can help jobseekers gain necessary work experience and reduce perceived risks and bottlenecks for employers. When designed and implemented properly, internships can be a “triple win” with benefits for young people, employers and intermediaries in Serbia.
- ▶ Stakeholders report that the key benefits of internships in Serbia include:
  - Young people who have done an internship primarily value the opportunities to learn new skills and gain an insight into the world of work;
  - Firms in Serbia are able to attract talented and motivated young people who become familiar with core processes and the company culture;
  - Intermediaries, such as university career centres and NGOs, can benefit from closer collaboration with businesses.
- ▶ However, several challenges persist:
  - Some internships in Serbia are characterised by low learning content, limited mentoring and poor working conditions, thus reducing the benefits for young people;
  - Employers may not be able to find young people with minimum prerequisite knowledge and skills, at times due to inadequate study programmes;
  - Intermediary organisations sometimes struggle to motivate young people and employers to participate in their programmes;
  - There is a lack of legal clarity in the field of internships in Serbia, negatively affecting the quality and availability of internships.
- ▶ Internships can be improved by taking into account globally recognised quality standards when designing and implementing internship programmes. Several firms and intermediaries in Serbia already apply good practices that can serve as example for other organisations in the country.
- ▶ Future research on internships in Serbia should include conducting representative surveys with youth and firms, better understanding specific sub-groups of employers and youth, as well as improving monitoring and evaluation of internships programmes.

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# 1 Background and Rationale

## The challenge: lack of skills and work experience

**Despite recent improvements in Serbia's key labour market indicators, youth unemployment and long-term unemployment remain high.** In 2018, one in every five people aged 15-29 was not in employment, education or training (NEET), while almost 60% of all unemployed were unemployed for more than 12 months ([Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia](#)). Such dismal figures place Serbia ahead of almost all EU member states ([Eurostat](#)). What is more, individuals with completed tertiary education represented almost 25% of all unemployed persons, indicating a mismatch between the knowledge and skills acquired at university and labour market demand ([Koettl-Brodmann et al., 2019](#)).

**Lack of skills and work experience represent the most common obstacles to hiring new workers,** according to a survey of employers in Serbia ([Patrinos and Iqbal, 2019](#)). Many employers are hesitant to hire a jobseeker without (relevant) work experience, as the perceived risks may be too high. Certain groups (including youth, the long-term unemployed and other vulnerable groups) may find it particularly difficult to gain relevant experience and join the world of work, thus facing an "experience trap" ([Rosas, 2016, p. 36](#)).

## Potential benefits of work-based learning/internships

**Work-based learning, including internships, can break the vicious cycle, by helping jobseekers gain necessary work experience and reducing perceived risks for employers.** Work-based learning refers to "all forms of learning that takes place in a real work environment" ([IAG-TVET, 2017, p.2](#)). Some forms of work-based learning, such as apprenticeships and internships, can help students and jobseekers accumulate meaningful work experience and thus contribute to breaking the experience trap. While longer-term apprenticeships are often the focus of work-based learning, internships have also become a very popular instrument to gain exposure to the world of work, including in Serbia.

**Internships represent a flexible and short-term instrument that can benefit a variety of stakeholders.** Internships are typically organised at the level of an individual firm or together with intermediaries (such as schools or the National Employment Service). In addition to improving on-the-job knowledge and skills of young people, internships provide employers with access to talent and support for ongoing projects, while intermediaries can ensure that their programmes are more relevant and attractive to young people ([Maertz, Stoeberl and Marks, 2014, p. 127](#)). Lastly, internships can be adapted to different needs, such as practice-oriented higher education, active labour market programmes (especially job training programmes) and workforce development in the private sector.

**However, not all internships are created equal: potential benefits to individuals, enterprises and the broader economy depend on the quality and characteristics of the internship.** Programme features (including content, working conditions, supervision, etc.), the role of intermediaries (e.g. university career centres), as well as the broader institutional and regulatory environment determine the impact of internships. Less-regulated programmes without strong intermediaries, such as voluntary internships in the open market, can have mixed effects compared to internships explicitly linked to study programmes or offered as a part of active labour market policies ([Stewart et al., 2018, p. 21](#)).

## Existing literature and gaps

**Available literature on internships in Serbia highlights quality issues.** Existing research indicates that many employers in Serbia have used internships as a way of hiring low-paid qualified staff on temporary contracts, rather than as a tool for improving young people's skills and a step towards permanent employment ([Pavlović-Križanić, Đurović, Velev, 2015, p. 40](#)). This finding suggests that internships in Serbia are often not living up to their potential.

**There is a knowledge gap in terms of the specific features of internship programmes in Serbia, as well as the conditions for success.** Much of the existing literature on work-based learning in Serbia focuses on medium-term, formal apprenticeship schemes, rather than on short-term internships, partly as a result of Serbia's Law on Dual Education (implemented since the 2019-20 school year). Available studies on short-term internships in Serbia typically examine the broader legal and institutional framework or cover only the basic aspects of such programmes as part of larger surveys on youth ([Pavlović-Križanić, Đurović, Velev, 2015](#); [Đurović, Škiljević and Stevanović, 2016](#); [Đurović, Velev and Manić Radoičić, 2017](#); [CeSID, 2019](#)). Hence, there is a lack of publicly available data on the most prevalent types of internships, the structure of the programmes and their quality (including potential drivers of quality issues, such as poor HR practices, low bargaining power of youth, etc.).

**To address this gap, this scoping study focuses on analysing the characteristics of short-term internships in Serbia.** The focus of this note is on internship programmes lasting up to one year aimed at improving the employability of prospective workers (typically young people). Other types of work-based learning, such as initiatives targeting existing workers, formal apprenticeship schemes or mandatory professional training, are beyond the scope of this paper.

## 2 Study Description

### Scope and learning objectives

**This scoping study covers all types of internships, which may vary according to the timing and nature of the programme (table 1).** In line with the classification used by [Stewart et al. \(2018\)](#), internships can be divided into three groups: (1) open-market internships; (2) internships as part of academic curricula; and (3) internships as part of active labour market policy (ALMP).

Table 1: Types of short-term internships

| Short-term internships   | Compulsory  | Optional  |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| <i>During education</i>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Internships as part of academic curricula</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open-market internships</li> </ul>                                       |
| <i>Outside education</i> | n/a   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open-market internships</li> <li>Internships as part of ALMPs</li> </ul> |

Source: Author based on [Stewart et al. \(2018, p. 16\)](#); [Hadjivassiliou et al. \(2012, p. 3\)](#)

**The overall aim of this study is to examine the quality of short-term internships in Serbia and identify potential areas for future research.** Drawing on inputs from a variety of stakeholders (interns, employers and intermediaries, such as universities, NGOs and job portals), we investigate the characteristics of internships in Serbia and the experience of key stakeholders. The analysis represents an important step towards understanding the quality of internships in Serbia, thus complementing existing research and helping to determine areas for future research and learning.

#### The specific learning objectives include:

- Understand the features and quality of internships in Serbia
- Explore the experience of different stakeholder groups (interns, employers and intermediaries), including their perception of the benefits and challenges of internships
- Examine how internships in Serbia compare to international best practices
- Identify avenues for future research

## Methodology

**This exploratory research adopts a mixed methods approach leveraging several sources of information to provide a balanced understanding of internships in Serbia.** Information on internships in Serbia and their quality was collected through:

- (1) A review of international and Serbian literature on this topic (*desk research*)
- (2) An online survey of young Serbians with internship experience (*online user survey*)
- (3) Interviews with representatives of key stakeholders in Serbia (*key informant interviews*).

### *Box 1: Overview of the methods used*

#### *Review of literature (desk research)*

- Review of publications and international best practices on internships
- Review of existing publications on internships in Serbia

#### *Online user survey (quantitative primary data collection)*

- **Time frame:** April 3 – May 6, 2020
- **Respondents:** Young people in Serbia with internship experience
- **Type:** A self-administered online survey via Google Forms
- **Duration:** approximately 10 minutes
- **Number of eligible respondents:** 194
- **Topics:** Youth experience during an internship; reasons for doing an internship; characteristics of internships; perceived benefits and challenges
- **Outreach:** Advertised on social media and through partner organisations
- **Other:** Survey respondents eligible to win a gift voucher; winner selected randomly among the eligible respondents

#### *Key informant interviews (qualitative primary data collection)*

- **Time frame:** April – June 2020
- **Respondents:** Representatives of key stakeholders active in the field of internships in Serbia (employers, employer associations, universities, job portals and NGOs)
- **Type:** Semi-structured interviews conducted remotely using Skype and Zoom
- **Duration:** 45-60 minutes per interview
- **Number of interviews:** 12 interviews
- **Topics:** General views on the benefits and challenges of internships; success factors and lessons learned (where applicable); availability and characteristics of internships
- **Outreach:** Existing network of experts and organisations, as well as internet search

**It is important to note that our findings on the quality of internships in Serbia are indicative rather than representative.** As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to conduct fieldwork in Serbia, including face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. Communication with key informants, in particular employers, was also hampered by the impact of the pandemic on businesses in Serbia and changes in the working arrangements (such as working from home). In addition, key informants were selected based on the recommendations of existing contacts and a targeted internet search. The online survey was advertised in specific Facebook groups and could be completed on a voluntary basis, thus introducing a potential bias (e.g. more motivated people decide to participate in the survey). Therefore, the findings presented in this study are not representative, but should rather be considered a foundation for future research on this topic.

## 3 Key Findings

### 3.1 Basic features of internships in Serbia

**The majority of survey respondents have completed an internship in the open market, either during or after their studies.** Almost two thirds of survey respondents completed a voluntary internship, rather than a mandatory internship as part of their academic curriculum or through the National Employment Service. Voluntary internships in the open market are agreed directly between the intern and the employer, and they are less regulated, which may affect their quality.

**Most internships are completed in private sector enterprises, but public enterprises and the NGO sector are also important internship providers.** According to our online survey, one in two young people in Serbia have done an internship in the private sector, while almost one third worked in public sector enterprises. These findings are largely in line with the annual survey on the position and needs of youth in Serbia, commissioned by Serbia's Ministry of Youth and Sport ([CeSID, 2019, p. 24](#)). Interestingly, more than 60% of respondents have completed an internship in micro and small enterprises, against the expectations that large organisations are the primary providers of internships.

**Internships are typically offered throughout the year based on employers' needs and the business cycle, though structured internship programmes (e.g. in the summer and organised jointly with intermediaries) also exist.** According to the representatives of large private sector employers in Serbia, internships are mostly organised on an ad-hoc basis depending on team or project needs.<sup>1</sup> There are also longstanding summer internship programmes arranged through intermediaries, such as university career development centres, employer associations and local government institutions.<sup>2</sup> Most survey respondents have completed internships lasting between one and six months. Large employers, such as Coca Cola and VIP Mobile, offer primarily three-month internships to ensure that their interns have sufficient time to acquire necessary skills and knowledge to support the teams.

**Internships are primarily offered and completed in the Belgrade region.** The majority of survey respondents have completed their last internship in the Belgrade region, pointing to regional differences in terms of internship opportunities and take-up. This is also in line with the information obtained through key informant interviews. For example, Najstudent, Serbia's largest online portal for internships, estimates that up to 80% of internship opportunities are in Belgrade. These findings are in line with expectations and anecdotal evidence, given that Belgrade is home to the country's leading companies, government institutions, as well as the biggest university in Serbia.

### 3.2 Benefits of internships

**Internships, when designed and implemented properly, can be a "triple win" with benefits for young people, employers and intermediaries in Serbia.** Our findings, based on a multi-stakeholder perspective, largely confirm the key benefits identified in the existing literature on internships in Serbia and beyond. We first report on the reported benefits for young people, followed by benefits for employers, as well as benefits to other stakeholders and the broader economy.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to ad-hoc internships, Coca Cola Serbia also organizes a regular summer internship programme (Coke Summership).

<sup>2</sup> For example, students at the University of Belgrade and the University of Niš can participate in the annual internship programme, with positions in the local government institutions and public enterprises (BGPRAKSA, U-NI PRAKSA). Students at the School of Technical Sciences in Zrenjanin benefit from internships organised through the local employer association ZREPOK (Zrenjanin Business Circle), the university and the city authorities.

*Benefits for young people*

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| <b>Opportunity to learn and put theory into practice</b>  |
| <p>Learning opportunity represents one of the key internship benefits for young people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than half of the survey respondents<sup>3</sup> mentioned the chance to acquire new skills and apply the knowledge they gained in school</li> <li>• According to one respondent, the internship provided her with more practical knowledge <i>“than all the theory [she learned] from previous education”</i></li> <li>• University departments, such as the School of Electrical Engineering at the University of Belgrade, allow students to complete their Bachelor or Master thesis during the internship</li> </ul> |
| <b>Professional orientation and work experience</b>   |
| <p>By completing an internship, young people can get an insight into the world of work and obtain relevant work experience (often a prerequisite for finding employment)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to survey respondents, internships helped them understand how things work in practice, “in the field”, as well as to question whether their career choice is right for them</li> <li>• Internships are organised in cooperation with intermediaries, such as the Youth with Disabilities Forum, to provide specific groups of young people with an opportunity to work</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Professional network and contacts</b>  |
| <p>Internships allow young people to meet and learn from a variety of professionals in the field, thus expanding their network beyond family and friends</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Almost 1 in 5 survey respondents view internships as a way to make new contacts</li> <li>• According to one respondent, <i>“during the internship I met women who were pleased with my work, so they invited me to [subsequent projects]”</i></li> </ul>  |
| <b>Improved job chances</b>   |
| <p>Internships are a tool to improve a person’s chances of finding a job</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Almost 20% of survey respondents noted that the internship either increased their chances of finding a job or directly led to a job offer following the successful completion of the internship</li> <li>• As one respondent puts it, <i>“[The internship] provided me with greater chances for employment compared to university classmates who have not had such an opportunity”</i></li> </ul>   |
| <b>Addressing misperceptions of prospective interns</b>   |
| <p>Young people may have preconceptions about the possibility of gaining relevant work experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intermediaries, such as Zrenjanin Business Circle (ZREPOK), report that young people in their community often believe it is difficult to build a career in a small town</li> <li>• According to ZREPOK, organising internships in the local community help address such misperceptions and provide young people with the necessary work experience</li> </ul>  |

*Benefits for firms*

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| <b>Talent acquisition and recruitment</b>   |
| <p>Internships represent an important way to acquire young talent and develop the intern’s skills in line with company needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to the Serbian Association of Employers, employers who organise internships are investing in their own “better future” and their ability to attract talented young people who are well-versed company processes and the workplace culture</li> <li>• For example, Bosch Serbia employees who previously completed an internship at the company typically demonstrate better skills, are familiar with the company culture, and need less time to adapt as they have already spent 6 months working for Bosch</li> </ul> |

<sup>3</sup> The number of survey respondents who shared their views on the benefits of internships is 150.

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| <b>Support for ongoing work &amp; innovative thinking</b>  |
| <p>Interns can be an ‘extra pair of hands’ and support existing business processes and projects based on the business needs and cycle</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large employers in Serbia, such as Delta Holding, VIP Mobile, Bosch and Coca Cola, typically organise such ad-hoc internships, as and when the business need arises</li> <li>• According to Delta Holding, interns also bring new ways of thinking and examine existing processes with a fresh pair of eyes, potentially leading to process improvements</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Employer branding</b>   |
| <p>Internships and internship programmes can be a way to boost company visibility and branding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For example, Coca Cola Serbia organises and advertises their annual summer internship programme, Coke Summership, that allows the company to increase its outreach</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Mentoring skills among existing employees</b>   |
| <p>Internships can offer existing employees an opportunity to improve their mentoring skills and their ability to transfer knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to the Zrenjanin Business Circle (ZREPOK), companies value employees that are able to supervise and explain complex processes to less experienced staff</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Addressing misperceptions of employers</b>  |
| <p>Successful internship programmes can help change potential employer preconceptions regarding the intern (lack of knowledge due an inadequate quality of the study programmes; limited experience in working with a particular target group)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For example, the internship programme for young persons with disabilities, coordinated by the Youth with Disabilities Forum, allowed companies to gain experience in working with persons with disabilities and helped reduce some of the barriers faced by young persons with disabilities</li> </ul> |

*Other benefits*

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| <b>Improved links between businesses and intermediaries</b>   |
| <p>Internships can improve collaboration between key stakeholders, such as businesses, education institutions, NGOs and the local government</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As an example, the summer internship programme coordinated by the Zrenjanin Business Circle (ZREPOK) supported links between businesses and the local university and discussions regarding potential curricula reforms</li> <li>• Internships can be structured to allow student interns to complete their Bachelor or Master thesis during the internship, thus bringing the theory taught at university and practical work closer together, according to the School of Electrical Engineering at Belgrade University</li> </ul> |

### 3.3 Challenges of internships in Serbia

**Many internships in Serbia face design and implementation issues.** Our research highlights several important challenges faced by all key stakeholders (young people, employers, intermediaries), echoing findings identified in the existing literature on internships in Serbia and more broadly. We first report on the challenges faced by interns, followed by the challenges faced by employers, as well as the broader, ecosystem-level challenges to quality internships, such as the legal framework.



*Challenges faced by interns*

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| <b>Lack of learning opportunities</b>  |
| <p>Lack of adequate content and structure, as well as the prevalence of menial, administrative tasks can reduce the possibility of acquiring new skills and developing knowledge during the internship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than a quarter of survey respondents<sup>4</sup> were dissatisfied with the availability of learning opportunities during their internship</li> <li>• According to one respondent, <i>“The terms “internship” and “professional training” are just a smokescreen, so that a private company could achieve its goals in a particular project, which consisted of a classic call centre job, as they would otherwise not be able to attract a sufficient number of people. This is not an internship.”</i></li> </ul>   |
| <b>Limited mentoring and lack of teamwork/ knowledge sharing</b>   |
| <p>Without a dedicated mentor or supervisor and/or a team of colleagues willing to share their knowledge, interns may find it difficult to master new processes and job requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Almost 40% of survey respondents were unsatisfied with the level of engagement of their mentors and colleagues</li> <li>• As one respondent puts it, <i>“[I was dissatisfied with my] mentor who was absolutely indifferent and who gave me, the only intern, less than two hours of his time during [my one-month internship].”</i></li> <li>• Employers and intermediaries have also mentioned that mentoring can be a bottleneck due to a lack of mentoring capacity (people, skills) (<i>Coca Cola</i>); employees are often expected to train the intern without a reduction in their day-to-day work (<i>BU School of Electrical Engineering</i>)</li> </ul> |
| <b>Poor working conditions (including lack of financial compensation)</b>  |
| <p>Internships are sometimes abused by employers who view them primarily as a source of cheap or free labour, often leading to long working hours without pay or social security contributions and extended internship contracts, rather than full-time employment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than a quarter of survey respondents highlighted inadequate working conditions as a key challenge during their internship experience (for example, low or no pay; lack of other benefits, such as transport/food allowance; working overtime (incl. weekends))</li> <li>• One survey respondent was unhappy that <i>“the internship turned into exploitation. Working for a couple of months [as an intern] turned into working for less than the minimum wage for a year despite having graduated in the meantime.”</i></li> </ul>   |
| <b>Schedule clash/ work-study balance</b>  |
| <p>Depending on the flexibility regarding internship timing or working hours, internships can sometimes interfere with the interns’ other priorities (e.g. studies)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achieving a work-study balance may be difficult if employers expect interns to work long hours (a particular challenge in the IT sector, according to the internship job portal Najstudent)</li> <li>• According to the University of Niš Career Centre, most students complete an internship in the summer, after their classes and exams (typically between mid-July and early September)</li> <li>• Sometimes there may be a timing issue due to employer vacation (e.g. many businesses have company-wide vacation in August), thus limiting opportunities for students to do an internship</li> </ul>  |

*Challenges faced by employers*

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| <b>Lack of adequate knowledge and skills</b>   |
| <p>Employers often face skill shortages and the lack of certain profiles to fill their vacancies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Several employer associations and employers in Serbia, including the Serbian Association of Employers, ZREPOK, VIP Mobile and Bosch, have mentioned inadequate study programmes and curricula not aligned with the needs of the economy as a challenge</li> <li>• Some employers, such as Bosch, have faced a shortage of interns with an engineering background (mechanical, electrical) and students with specialised skills and knowledge of equipment</li> </ul> |

<sup>4</sup> The number of survey respondents who shared their views on the challenges of internships is 117.

- According to ZREPOK, employers in smaller communities, such as Zrenjanin, have experienced a brain drain of young people moving to Belgrade or abroad

#### Unrealistic expectations of prospective interns

Mismatch between interns' expectations and what a particular job entails in practice may create challenges for the intern and the employer

- According to Delta Holding and VIP Mobile, interns may have unrealistic expectations of the type of work they will be doing (particularly in sectors, such as marketing, accounting, human resources, etc.)

### Challenges faced by intermediaries

#### Outreach strategies & participation

Intermediaries sometimes find it difficult to attract enough businesses and young people to participate in an internship programme and ensure its long-term sustainability

- Although ZREPOK's summer internship programme in Zrenjanin and the U-NI Praksa programme organised by the University of Niš have both been running for at least five years, sometimes there are not enough applicants for the internship positions; the number of applicants could be partly dependent on personal recommendations from professors or former interns (alumni)
- According to the Youth with Disabilities Forum, motivating companies to offer internships for persons with disabilities has not been an easy task, potentially because of employers' limited experience in this field

#### Different ways of acquiring talent

Internships are not the only way for employers to acquire talent, which may limit their availability

- According to VIP Mobile and Najstudent internship portal, other forms of recruiting talent in Serbia include case study competitions and hackathons

#### Relevance of mandatory internships

Although mandatory internships as part of study programmes can be an excellent way to motivate students to complete internships and gain work experience, the structure of many study programmes is such that mandatory internships typically only bring a small number of credits

- As a result, such internships are typically quite short, between two and four weeks on average
- They may only be completed to satisfy a formal requirement, as it may be difficult to acquire in-depth knowledge due to their short-term nature (BU School of Electrical Engineering)

### Challenges at the ecosystem/macro-level

#### Regional differences between Belgrade and other regions

Regional inequalities and the structure of the local economy may limit the availability of internships

- According to Najstudent and University of Niš Career Development Centre, most internship opportunities are concentrated in Belgrade (which accounted for more than 40% of Serbia's GDP in 2018)
- For example, engineering students at the University of Niš may find it difficult to find adequate internship positions in southern Serbia (as existing factories focus primarily on assembling, rather than design and engineering)

#### Legal framework

Without a legal framework to define internships and set minimum standards, it may be difficult to ensure quality internships for all young people or provide sufficient clarity to employers

- Available studies on internships in Serbia, commissioned by the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU) and Belgrade Open School, have focused on the policy/macro-level and have highlighted the importance of adapting the legal framework to ensure quality internships
- According to the Serbian Association of Employers and the University of Belgrade Career Development Centre, internships in Serbia are not clearly defined in the law at present (although there are workarounds, such as a non-defined contract)

| Administrative barriers  |
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| <p>Regulations and administrative processes may create additional burden for employers, thus reducing their willingness to offer internships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serbian Association of Employers (SAE) highlighted the lack of incentives for companies to pay their interns, given the significantly higher social security contributions in case the intern is paid</li> <li>• According to the SAE, certain National Employment Service measures, such as the “Employer-requested training”, could help reduce the cost of training borne by the employer, but the administrative requirements are too complex for most employers to participate</li> </ul> |
| Transport barriers   |
| <p>Interns, particularly specific groups, such as youth with disabilities or rural youth, may face challenges in terms of organised transportation to and from the workplace</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This issue was highlighted during the internship programme run by the Youth with Disabilities Forum</li> </ul>   |

### 3.4 Success factors

**To ensure the quality of internships in Serbia, stakeholders at all levels should follow international standards.** Successful internships require that quality standards be in place at the level of individual employers (micro-level), intermediaries (meso-level) and the ecosystem (macro-level) ([Hempel and Pantelic, 2020](#)). The success factors for quality internships highlighted by different stakeholders in Serbia are organised accordingly below.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Micro-level (employers)*

##### **Preparation, outreach and selection**

- **Changing outreach strategies:** Traditional outreach channels, such as job portals and company websites, are often not sufficient. Employers should foster close links with relevant university departments and professors, and actively participate at job fairs (*Bosch*).
- **Structured selection process:** The intern selection process should consist of several steps as needed to ensure that qualified candidates are found (e.g. written application plus online tests, phone interviews, in-person interview or group interviews). The process may often be similar to the selection process for a junior role (*Coca Cola*).

##### **Initial orientation**

- **Introductory guidance:** For larger enterprises, interns who receive a general overview of the company (e.g. by spending a few days in the field or shadowing other teams) can better appreciate the complexity of the business and the role of their team (*VIP Mobile, Coca Cola*).
- **Clarity of tasks and objectives:** The host sector/ team should prepare an internship plan and define internship goals (*VIP Mobile*). Clear objectives help the intern understand what they will be working on and represents a useful checklist to monitor completion (*University of Belgrade Career Centre*).

##### **Content and supervision**

- **Relevance of tasks:** Successful internships provide the intern with real work experience and allow the intern to see tangible results of their work (*Coca Cola*).
- **Mentoring:** The presence of a mentor/supervisor and their quality represent a crucial ingredient of a successful internship (*ZREPOK, University of Belgrade Career Centre, Coca Cola, Delta Holding*). Specifically, the mentor’s willingness to invest time and share knowledge, as well as the intern’s willingness to learn are important. A mentor does not always have to be a manager, but also a technical expert who can serve as the focal point and guide the intern on a day-to-day basis. By motivating technical experts to become mentors and providing them

<sup>5</sup> Sources of key informants who reiterated the respective messages are indicated in (*italics*).

with training, they can improve their leadership skills (*Coca Cola, Delta Holding, Serbian Association of Employers*).

- **Openness and knowledge sharing:** Apart from mentors and direct supervisors, the readiness of other colleagues to include interns in any relevant work/ processes can improve the intern's experience (*Delta Holding*).
- **Exposure & special activities:** Extra training and development offered to interns, such as workshops with internal and external speakers, senior management career talks, can improve the overall quality of the programme and intern satisfaction (*Coca Cola*).

### **Closure**

- **Monitoring and exit interviews:** Providing feedback helps direct the intern, even without a formal monitoring system (*Delta Holding*). Information obtained through exit interviews at the end of an internship can be used to improve the structure of the programme and the experience for future interns (*Bosch*).

### **Meso-level (intermediaries)**

#### **Programme design**

- **Partnerships with key stakeholders:** By working closely with key stakeholders to design and promote the internship programme, stakeholder interests can be better aligned, thus ensuring a more sustainable programme (*ZREPOK, AHK Serbia, University of Belgrade Career Centre, Youth with Disabilities Forum, , University of Nish Career Centre*). The presence of an intermediary can help resolve any potential employer queries or concerns (*Youth with Disabilities Forum*).
- **Internship guidelines:** Clear internship guidelines can be used to determine the format and structure of the internship, as well as to specify the focus on learning objectives and any formal prerequisites (*ZREPOK, Youth with Disabilities Forum, University of Belgrade Career Centre*). Guidelines may be developed in close cooperation with businesses and other stakeholders to ensure that the guidelines can easily be implemented in practice (*Youth with Disabilities Forum*).

#### **Selection and outreach**

- **Employer motivation & outreach strategies:** Motivating employers to participate in the internship programme is crucial (*Serbian Association of Employers*). For example, peer working groups within employer associations can allow large and small businesses to exchange their experiences and best practices in the field of internships (*AHK Serbia*). A centralised online portal to advertise internship positions for free can reduce the barriers for employers, particularly for SMEs (*Najstudent, AHK Serbia*). The university alumni network could be leveraged to ensure that current students can access more internship opportunities (*BU School of Electrical Engineering*).
- **Offer specialised services to interns and employers:** When intermediaries offer targeted support and workshops to interns and/or employers, the quality of the internship programme can be improved. For example, training for youth can include soft skills, presentation skills, and introduction to the world of work, while training for employers can cover mentoring and supervision as well as specific information about working with a particular target group (*ZREPOK, Youth with Disabilities Forum*).

#### **Monitoring & evaluation**

- **Feedback system:** Regular monitoring (e.g. mid-term and final) with both mentors and interns, as well as monthly intern progress reports, can help ensure any issues are rectified throughout the internship (*University of Belgrade Career Centre*). A competition may be organised at the end of the internship cycle to select the best intern in the cohort, providing additional motivation to interns and mentors to (*ZREPOK*).

- **Post-internship evaluation:** Following the end of the internship programme, an evaluation can be conducted to identify what worked well and what could be improved in subsequent cycles (e.g. the 5-year evaluation report by ZREPOK; or the external evaluation report commissioned by *Youth with Disabilities Forum*).

### Macro-level (ecosystem)

#### Legal framework

- **Need for clear and transparent regulations:** Clear rules on internships are needed, as many employers, in particular small and medium enterprises, are hesitant to offer internships for fear of breaching the law (*Serbian Association of Employers*). The Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU) and Belgrade Open School have highlighted the importance of clearly defining internships in the Labour Law.

## 4 Future Research & Learning Agenda

Based on this exploratory study and previous research on internships in Serbia, several areas for future research and learning emerge. While it is beyond the scope of this study to provide specific recommendations for each of the stakeholders involved in designing, running and participating in internships, table 2 provides an overview of potential research topics to be further explored in the future.

Table 2: Recommendations for future research on internships in Serbia

| Research topics                                      | Details   | Rationale   |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Youth level</b>                                   |   |   |
| <i>Representative survey on internship use</i>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representative youth survey (by region, age, type of host organization, education status etc.)</li> <li>• Explore working conditions (e.g. pay), incl. by employer type/size</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limitations of existing surveys</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Analysis of specific groups of young people</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth without internship experience to understand the reasons for not completing an internship (willingness; availability; quality)</li> <li>• Youth with specific socio-economic background (e.g. Roma, youth with disabilities, etc.)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large share of youth has not completed any internship</li> <li>• Understand barriers for disadvantaged groups</li> </ul> |
| <b>Employer level</b>                                |   |   |
| <i>Representative survey on internship provision</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representative employer survey (by region, size, sector, ownership, etc.)</li> <li>• Explore working conditions (e.g. pay), incl. by employer type/size</li> <li>• Explore challenges related to the legal framework</li> </ul>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of representative data on employers</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Focus on specific groups of employers</i>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employers without internship positions to understand the reasons for not offering internships</li> <li>• Qualitative analysis that focuses on SMEs</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most available information comes from large employers that offer internships</li> </ul>                                  |

| <b>Subnational level</b>  |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <b><i>Focus on internships at the local level</i></b>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the availability and uptake of internships in specific regions, taking into account youth and employer interest, availability of intermediaries and the social context (family, school, peers)</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong heterogeneity of internship provision and use across the country</li> </ul>                        |
| <b>Cross-cutting</b>  |  |  |
| <b><i>Set up and improve monitoring and evaluation of internship programmes</i></b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support establishment of lean monitoring and evaluation systems (in firms and intermediary organisations)</li> <li>• Goal is to improve collection of quality administrative data on internships (e.g. type of internships, profile of interns, quality, post-internship outcomes, etc.)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance learning and accountability</li> <li>• Make the case for internships based on evidence</li> </ul> |

Source: Authors, key informant interviews

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# Annexes

## Annex 1: Methodology

### Methodological approach

- Exploratory research using a mixed methods approach that relied on quantitative primary data collection (online user survey), qualitative primary data collection (key informant interviews) and desk research

### Study timeline

- Desk research and validation of the research topics conducted in March 2020
- Primary data collected in April and May 2020 (online user survey open for submissions from April 3 to May 6)

### Data collection

- Quantitative primary data collection: a 10-min online user survey of young people in Serbia with internship experience (in Serbian; using Google Forms)
  - Call for participation posted in Facebook groups and sent to partner organisations for further dissemination; online ads posted on social media
- Qualitative primary data collection: interviews with key stakeholders in the field of internships in Serbia (in Serbian; typically lasting 45-60min)
  - Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, key informant interviews were conducted remotely using Skype and Zoom

### Sample

- User survey
  - 296 submissions between April 3 and May 6, 2020
  - - 91 respondents who have not completed an internship in the past 3 years
  - - 11 ineligible submissions (duplicate submissions; underage respondents; respondents born before 1980; clearly invalid submissions)
  - = 194 eligible respondents with internship experience
- Key informant interviews = 12 key stakeholders in the field of internships in Serbia
  - 4 employers
  - 3 employer associations
  - 3 universities/career development centres
  - 1 internship portal
  - 1 NGO

### Analysis

- *User survey*: data cleaning (removal of invalid and duplicate submissions according to predefined criteria); descriptive analysis of closed-ended questions using Excel and text analysis of open-ended questions to identify key themes
- *Key informant interviews*: Summary notes were written for each interview and text analysis was conducted to identify key themes



**Limitations**

- Non-probability sampling method: convenience/voluntary response sampling
  - User survey: public call for people to complete the user survey; reliance on specific Facebook groups to promote the survey
  - Key informant interviews: reliance on direct contacts/cold calling for key informant interviews
- The findings presented in this study are not representative, but should rather be considered a foundation for future research on this topic

**Annex 2: List of key informant interviews**

| #  | Type                 | Organization name  | Interviewee                  | Role   |
|----|----------------------|--|------------------------------|--|
| 1  | Employer             | Bosch Serbia   | Vladimir Đuričić             | Human Resources (PciP/HRL)                                   |
| 2  | Employer             | Coca Cola Serbia   | Milica Urošević              | Organisational Development and Employer Branding Specialist  |
| 3  | Employer             | Delta Holding  | Jelena Petrović              | Recruitment and Selection Specialist                         |
|    |                      |  | Tihana Vukašin               | Recruitment and Selection Specialist                         |
| 4  | Employer             | VIP Mobile   | Mirjana Todorović            | HR Partner   |
| 5  | Employer association | German-Serbian Chamber of Commerce (AHK Serbia)                                  | Milica Ožegović              | Marketing & Publications Specialist                          |
| 6  | Employer association | Zrenjanin Business Circle (ZREPOK), Serbian Association of Employers (Zrenjanin) | Izabela Kiš                  | ZREPOK Secretary and PR Manager                              |
| 7  | Employer association | Serbian Association of Employers   | Ljiljana Pavlović            | Head of Membership Department                                |
| 8  | Job portal           | NajStudent (InfoStud)  | Petra Kanurić                | Team Lead  |
|    |                      |  | Željko Skenderović           | Content Editor and User Communication                        |
| 9  | NGO                  | Youth with Disabilities Forum  | Jovana Krivokuća-Milovanović | Executive Director   |
| 10 | University           | University of Belgrade, Career Development Centre                                | Ana Janković Barović         | Programme Coordinator and Career Counsellor                  |
| 11 | University           | University of Belgrade, School of Electrical Engineering                         | Asst. Prof. Kosta Jovanović  | Assistant Professor & Vice-Dean for Corporate Relations      |
| 12 | University           | University of Niš, Career Development Centre                                     | Prof. Miodrag Lazić          | Vice-Dean for Finance; Director of Career Development Centre |

**Annex 3: Data collection instruments**

Available upon request. Please contact [khempel@prospera-consulting.com](mailto:khempel@prospera-consulting.com)

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